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ABSTRACT

A study was undertaken to document, through data gathered from surveys, interviews, and observations, the approaches fourth grade elementary school teachers were using to teach reading comprehension. The study focused on the actual teacher behaviors, methods, and materials rather than on what reading methods, texts or basal series' manuals said should be done. The sample population consisted of 44 fourth grade teachers in public schools in East Central Illinois, who received questionnaires. Eight of the teachers who responded were randomly selected to be interviewed; another eight were selected for a three-day observation of their classroom instruction in reading and social studies. Four members of this latter group were also interviewed. Findings indicated that the majority of the teachers viewed the oral or silent reading of basal series followed by oral questions as the best way to reach their main teaching goal--literal comprehension. Social studies teachers did not consider teaching the children how to read content material. While the majority of teachers who participated believed that comprehension was important to reading, they were uncertain about what comprehension and comprehension instruction entailed. Comprehension seemed to be approached from the point of view of a series of skills to be mastered separately. (MKM)

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READING COMPREHENSION INSTRUCTION IN THE FOURTH GRADE: A TALE OF THREE METHODS

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READING COMPREHENSION INSTRUCTION IN THE FOURTH GRADE: A TALE OF THREE METHODS

Statement of the Problem and Theoretical Framework

Mastery of reading is awarded a place of importance as a goal of education by the public and professional educators as well as by the federal government (Shami and Hershkowitz, 1974; National Institute of Education, 1976; Anderson, R. C., et al., 1976). While considerable research has focused on the acquisition of various reading skills considered to be important to the act of reading (Huey, 1908; Anderson and Dearborn, 1952; and Gibson and Levin, 1975), most of that knowledge has concerned decoding while much less is known about the processes involved in and the teaching of reading comprehension. It has only been within the last decade or so that research has begun to provide theoretical concepts which may give us a more definitive understanding about the nature of reading comprehension.

From the point of view of teacher education, it is imperative that this new research provide the field with resources to improve comprehension instruction. If theory and basic research are to make a difference in classroom instruction, questions on their appropriateness, relevancy, and usefulness to the classroom teachers' way of understanding reading comprehension will need to be answered. An extensive* review of the literature on reading comprehension illustrated that most of the studies dealing with comprehension have not produced much information that would help classroom teachers understand how thinking abilities are applied in reading so that they can establish instructional goals, develop appropriate activities, and assess student progress. First, a look at the literature attempting to define comprehension resulted in the disappointing discovery that, although almost everyone agrees that

*Over 80 references were cited in the review of the literature. These are not included for the sake of brevity.

comprehension is synonomous with understanding what is read: there is no consensus regarding the underlying processes of comprehension. Second, a review of some of the approaches to studying reading comprehension revealed that although a few new approaches show promise of shedding light on the process, most have merely studied the products of comprehension not the process at all. When some of the more widely used commercially available instructional materials were examined, they too proved disappointing because little or no experimental or evaluative research has been found which will "back-up" their claims that improvement in reading comprehension will follow from their use. If improvement does follow, no one is certain why. Finally, while the research on teacher effectiveness has provided the starting point for patterns of effective teaching, little of that research has delved deeply into exactly which combination of teacher characteristics, instructional practices, and materials make a difference in achievement in reading comprehension. Questions about the appropriateness, relevancy, and usefulness of the reviewed research on comprehension have not been answered for teachers.

Attempts to change curricula have often run up against long established prejudices and procedures built into schooling. Results which did not take into consideration the assumptions or restraints of schools or which ran counter to prevailing opinion have often been dismissed as invalid or ignored entirely (Petrie, 1968; Goodlad and Klein, 1974). It appears that we have been saying that we know what schools need without knowing what schools already have; and that we know what to put into schools without knowing what needs to be replaced. This study begins a process of discovering what schools and teachers are doing in the area of reading comprehension.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to document, through data gathered from surveys, interviews, and observations, the approaches the teachers in fourth grade in public elementary schools were using in order to help children understand what they read. The study focused on the actual behaviors, methods and materials of the teacher in the classroom rather than on what reading methods, texts or basal series manuals say should be done. This was done with the firm belief that one way to facilitate the acceptance of new instructional procedures based upon research is to provide researchers with information regarding current classroom practices. Such information can provide researchers with knowledge about the variables that teachers believe in and the terminology through which they express ideas about those variables. In turn, researchers can use this information to illustrate to teachers how new instructional practices based on research are compatible with what the teacher believes to be important or to test new practices against existing ones and present the results to teachers in ways that illustrate their appropriateness, relevancy, and usefulness.

The first major research question of the study was: What approaches (behaviors, methods, and materials) do fourth grade teachers in public elementary schools use to help children understand what they are reading? The related sub-questions were:

a. How much time is spent in formal reading instruction each day in the classes studied?
b. What types of reading activities take place in that time spent?
c. What kinds of materials are used?
d. How do teachers organize their reading classes?
e. How much time is spent in social studies instruction? What is the role of reading in this instruction.
f. What kinds of activities take place during that time? What kinds of materials are used?

The second major question was: What are the teachers' concepts of reading comprehension? The related sub-questions were:

a. How do teachers define comprehension
b. What are the teachers' sources of information regarding comprehension?
c. How do teachers assess comprehension in their classrooms?

Methodology

Sample. To answer the research questions, data were gathered through surveys, interviews, and observations. The sample population for this study consisted of 44 fourth grade teachers in public schools in East Central Illinois who taught reading and social studies in self-contained classrooms or departmentalized settings. This sample resulted in a variety of fourth grade teachers, seven male and thirty-seven females, some who had less than a year teaching experience and others who had more than 20 years experience. Teachers from both rural and urban school districts were included in the sample.

Procedures. After the sample had been identified, questionnaires were sent to the 44 teachers. Eight of the teachers who responded to the survey were randomly selected to be interviewed. Another eight were selected for a three-day observation of their classroom instruction in reading and social studies. Four members of this latter group were also interviewed.

Instruments and Processes. Instruments were designed for each step of the data gathering. The survey and interview questionnaires focused on each of the sub-questions previously mentioned.

The observation schedule was constructed to obtain information about the teachers' actual instructional programs in reading and a content area. It allowed recording of data regarding the time taken to instruct, and the goals, methods, and materials under consideration during that time. The interactions which were recorded were then classified according to pre-specified categories (See Appendix A). Thus both the raw data and summary data were available for analysis.

During the process of deciding on various observation categories, the author developed a definition of reading comprehension instruction which combined the learning theorist Gagne's (1970) ideas regarding instruction with a model of reading comprehension designed by Harris & Smith (1976). This definition proved useful in making decisions regarding which teacher behaviors constituted reading comprehension instruction. Because this definition utilizes concepts from instruction theory, it proved particularly useful as a bridge between research in reading comprehension instruction and actual practices in the classroom. It will provide pre- and in-service education programs with examples of the components involved in comprehension instruction so that teachers may begin to conceive of comprehension instruction in broader terms and thus provide their students with a greater opportunity to learn.

Analyses. The data were first analyzed and presented in a quantitative manner utilizing data gathered by each of the sources. In this way data gathered on each sub-question could be compared and contrasted across the survey, interview and observation data-gathering methods. Through the use of tables, figures, and verbal summaries, information was gained regarding the kinds of reading skills teachers regard as most important to teach and the methods and materials they use to teach those skills. Further, information was provided which pertains to the role of reading instruction in content areas.

The second method of presenting data consisted of four mini-tales, more qualitative descriptions of how teachers present instruction in reading. These tales were compiled from a synthesis of the data gathered from four teachers who participated in all three data-gathering methods.

Main Findings

For the sake of brevity the findings from the three methods are here

summarized and combined. In the dissertation separate results are provided and then compared and contrasted.

I. What approaches do fourth grade teachers in public elementary schools use to help children understand what they are reading?

a. How much time is spent in formal reading instruction each day?

The forty-four teachers spent from 40-120 minutes of their school day in formal reading instruction. The average time spent was 60 minutes which represented 18 percent of the average school day. Teacher self-reports were usually in terms of an average time, which while time often did not present a clear story of the kinds of factors that impinge or the actual program. Interviews and observations illustrated that teachers appear to have their reading period scheduled by extraneous factors such as the need to coordinate teaching with another teacher, the requirements of other subject matter, or the fact that the organization scheme utilized by the majority-grouping in conjunction with a basal series--demanded at least 20 minutes of teacher time per group. The observations also revealed that as much as 19 percent of the time of some reading lessons was spent in non-instructional activities such as disciplining, passing out paper, or changing seats.

b. What kinds of reading activities take place in that time open?
c. What kinds of materials are used? How are they used?
d. How are the classes organized for reading?

The teaching of literal comprehension was recognized as the most important instructional activity in fourth grade. This was followed by the teaching of word recognition and word meaning skills. Other instructional activities such as inferential comprehension, study skills and rate of reading were ranked much lower and more or less equally behind the top three.

Three teachers who shared a large class of 75 students organized their classroom in a flexible manner around the use of tradebooks and skill groups. The other 41 teachers used a basal series as the developmental core of their program. Of those teachers who used basals, four taught reading by using one group, 13 organized two groups, 11 teachers had three reading groups, and nine teachers used four groups. In addition there were two teachers each who used five and six reading groups. By and large these groups proved to be inflexible after the first three weeks of school. Twenty-seven teachers reported that they used only one basal series in their program; while 14 used two or more of them as enrichment or remedial resources. Twelve of the teachers who reported using basal series commented that they did nothing to modify the basal teachers guide but used it as it was prescribed. Five teachers reported that they used no materials other than basals; but this was not the case in the majority of the classrooms. Other materials which were used included tradebooks, reading "labs," skillbuilders, various commercial and teacher-made games, and dittos. These materials were abundant in some classrooms and practically non-existent in others.

The use of oral reading followed by oral questions was the most widely used method of utilizing material. Silent reading of the material followed by oral questions was second. Basal workbook assignments as specified by the teachers manual was the third most often used method of teaching. By combining the information in questions a-c, one can begin to see a pattern emerging which illustrates that the majority of the teachers viewed the oral or silent reading of basal series followed by oral questions as the best way to reach their number one teaching goal--literal comprehension.

e. How much time is spent in social studies instruction? What is the role of reading in this instruction?

f. What kinds of activities take place during this time? What kinds of materials were used?

Teachers spent from 30 to 50 minutes per day on social studies instruction. This represented an average of 12 percent of their school day. Reading was viewed as a tool to use in their instruction of other subjects, but reading skills were not taught in these subjects and rarely were even practiced.

In some classrooms children were expected to learn subject matter content on a relatively independent basis through individual or group projects. Very few children pursued the same projects at the same time. They read widely in a variety of non-fiction trade books and reference books. In addition these teachers used a wide variety of non-print media such as films, guest lecturers, and hands-on experience, to provide instruction. In other classrooms a second major pattern emerged. The study of content was shaped by one text which became the curriculum and was followed in a closely guided manner. Children were expected to learn the content by reading either orally in a round robin manner or silently. The reading was then followed by oral questions about the material. Fewer non-print media were used in these latter classrooms than in the less structured programs.

Interestingly enough, both types of programs were responses to the fact that teachers felt that children could not read the required material. One group's answer was to provide instruction through a variety of sources, hoping that the students would learn from one of them. The other group's answer was to provide oral reading and discussion, hoping that the students who could not read well would learn through listening to others. Neither group of teachers considered teaching the children how to read content material. Reading skills were not stressed.

II. What are the teachers' concepts of reading comprehension?

a. How do teachers define comprehension?

When the investigation focused exclusively on comprehension, teachers agreed that one of the most important goals was to help children understand what they read. However, they tended to define comprehension in terms of the skills associated with it, not in terms of its processes or other variables deemed by researchers to be important to comprehension. When they discussed comprehension instruction, they cited oral and/or silent reading as their major instructional technique. Variables such as preparation, modeling, oral language facility, or reinforcement were seldom mentioned. As the content of their comprehension instruction was discussed, it became clear that the majority of teachers provided instruction with regard to those skills which are generally classified as literal comprehension by researchers while excluding those classified as inferential comprehension.

b. What are the teachers' sources of information regarding comprehension?

The basal teachers guide ranked first as the source of comprehension information. Most teachers stated that their reading methods courses had done little to prepare them to teach comprehension. It appears that whatever is suggested by the basal teachers manual, as the instruction for the day, is followed by most teachers. Little diagnostic teaching takes place.

c. How do teachers asses comprehension in their classroom?

The same technique used to teach comprehension was also widely used to assess it; that is, teachers asked oral questions after the children read the material. In addition, many teachers reported using the basal worksheets as evaluative devices. One comment frequently hear was that

although the children could do well on the worksheets, they could not accomplish the same task in a "real reading situation." It appears that much instruction and assessment is done out of context of reading situations; and therefore there is little transfer of learning to "real reading."

Conclusions and Implications

The conclusions which can be drawn from the complete data presented in the dissertation provide strong implications for reading researchers and teacher educators who are interested in improving our knowledge about the reading comprehension process and in improving the manner in which reading comprehension can be taught in our schools. The data obtained from this study illustrate that although the majority of teachers who participated believed that comprehension was important to reading, they were uncertain about what comprehension and comprehension instruction entailed. Furthermore, the data show that the commercial materials upon which the teachers depend for the majority of their instruction (predominately basal readers) tend to approach comprehension from a point of view of a series of skills to be mastered separately. However, the various approaches to studying comprehension which are being researched strongly suggest that comprehension is a multi-dimensional process involving the holistic cognitive processing of language.

Implications for Teacher Educators. One of the most useful features of having derived a definition of reading comprehension instruction from combining instructional theory with a model of reading comprehension is that the resulting data link up fairly directly with teacher education programs. One theme which ran through the results was the fact that many teachers simply have a lack of knowledge about the complex nature of

reading comprehension and its instruction. While we may already discuss such factors as diagnostic teaching, study skills, etc. in our methods courses, the data from this study were collected using categories that enable us to see immediately which aspects of instructional theory are being utilized and which need more emphasis. Although the current research-based theory is still incomplete, there is some knowledge about reading comprehension that can make a difference in how a teacher instructs by providing a framework for making day-to-day instructional decisions.

Multiple factors influencing comprehension. Because teachers appeared vague about factors other than skills instruction which influenced comprehension, reading methods instruction might well begin by providing teachers with a simple model which explicates the important variables in teaching comprehension. Once the theory behind these factors has been introduced, practical ideas for using them in instruction can be presented. Furthermore, strategies for promoting comprehension such as concept stretching, previewing, feedback, and modeling could be demonstrated.

Diagnostic teaching. It is apparent that the majority of teachers studied depended upon a basal reading series to tell them how and when to teach a topic. The immediate needs of their students appeared to be secondary. While the basal reader may act as a backbone for instruction, teachers must realize that they are the ones who are best able to diagnose what their students need at any particular time. Because the basal reader appears to dominate classroom instruction, teachers need to receive instruction on how to use the basal in a diagnostic manner.

Direct verbal instruction. In addition to supplying information to teachers regarding learning <u>when</u> to teach a topic, teacher educators

need to supply more information about how to teach a topic. The importance of direct verbal instruction should not be underestimated. Most exercises in basal texts and workbooks test students on their knowledge of comprehension skills rather than teach them to use the skill in everyday reading. The general ability of the student to think does not imply that he will be aware of how or when to do it. Without direct instruction there is no reason to believe that a student will be able to infer or read critically.

Question asking. Teachers used questions to direct and to evaluate the level of the students' understanding of the material. Teacher educators must realize that effective questioning is not an innate talent, but rather it is a skill that can be developed with practice. Instruction in a reading methods course should contain information regarding both the types of questions and the sequences which can serve different purposes and stimulate different levels of thinking.

Study skills. Many teachers in the present study used only one social studies text. Even those that used more than one text seldom made attempts to teach children how to use the reading material. Teacher educators should stress the need to preface any kind of learning experience by developing key concepts and vocabulary, examining the structure of what is to be read, developing purposes for comprehending and remembering, and finally, by defining the reading/study skills needed to accomplish these purposes.

Implications for Reading Researchers. In addition to helping teachers become more knowledgeable about current research findings, reading researchers must consider ways in which they can disseminate information about future research findings.

Efficient use of time. Almost any new instructional practice will make demands on the teacher that the basal approach does not make. A common theme that ran through the results was the complaint by teachers that they did not have enough time to teach in the ways they would like to teach. If new instructional practices are to be accepted, it is imperative that researchers use such studies as the present one to find out how much time teachers have available and how they are currently using their time. Then the researcher can be prepared to illustrate to the teacher how the new instructional practice will be useful and not more time consuming.

Basal reader collaboration. As long as teachers rely so heavily on the basal reader as their source of instruction, it appears that reading researchers should investigate the possibility that new instructional practices can be disseminated most effectively through the basal reader. While it may not be easy to convince basal publishing companies to move from "tried and true" methods, an attempt must be made. Many veteran teachers will never take another college reading course again. One way to continue the teachers' education, however, is for researchers and basal publishers to join hands in accepting that responsibility.

Bridging the language gap between researchers and practitioners. To gain acceptance of new instructional procedures by teachers, it seems imperative that the language describing the procedures be that which teachers can readily understand. The researcher who can show how his new procedure, whether it be from a psycholinguistic, cognitive psychology, or other viewpoint, relates to the teacher's idea of comprehension will be the researcher whose new procedures will be more readily accepted. The researcher should begin with the teacher's definition of comprehension

as "understanding what is read," and add to that definition details that utilize instructional theory concepts with which the teacher is familiar. If the researcher casts the new procedure in such terms, the teacher is more likely to see how it will fit into her program.

Investigators such as this one, which document for researchers and teacher educators some of the language and realities of classroom life, may provide the beginnings of the bridge linking the fruits of research with the acceptance of practical instructional concepts.

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